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Languages of South Africa

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[South Africa](#) has eleven [official languages](#): [Afrikaans](#), [English](#), [Ndebele](#), [Northern Sotho](#), [Sotho](#), [Swazi](#), [Tswana](#), [Tsonga](#), [Venda](#), [Xhosa](#) and [Zulu](#). Fewer than two percent of South Africans speak a first language other than an official one.^[1] Most South Africans can speak more than one language. Dutch and English were the first official languages of South Africa from 1910 to 1925. Afrikaans was [added as a part of Dutch in 1925](#). Dutch was replaced by Afrikaans when South Africa became a republic in 1961,^[2] and Dutch was dropped in 1984, so between 1984 and 1994, South Africa had two official languages: English and Afrikaans.^[3]

The English version of the South African constitution refers to the languages by the names in those languages: [isiZulu](#), [isiXhosa](#), [Afrikaans](#), [Sepedi](#) (referring to Northern Sotho), [Setswana](#), [English](#), [Sesotho](#) (referring to Southern Sotho), [Xitsonga](#), [Siswati](#), [Tshivenda](#) and [isiNdebele](#) (referring to Southern Ndebele).^[4]

In South Africa, Southern Ndebele is known simply as *Ndebele*, as most speakers of Northern Ndebele live in Zimbabwe. The 1993 version of the Constitution referred to Northern Sotho as *Sesotho sa Leboa*, but the 1996 version referred to the language as *Sepedi*.^[5] Different government departments and official bodies use different terms to denote Northern Sotho.^{[6][7]}

The main language of government is English even if South Africans often take pride in using indigenous languages for any purpose. Afrikaans also features prominently in commerce together with English as the languages with the highest number of fluent speakers are Afrikaans and English.^[8]

In terms of linguistic classification, the official languages include two [West-Germanic](#) languages ([English](#) and [Afrikaans](#)) and nine [Bantu languages](#). Four of these are [Nguni languages](#) (Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele) and three are [Sotho–Tswana languages](#) (Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Tswana). Tsonga is a [Tswa–Ronga language](#).

[South African Sign Language](#) is a distinct though incompletely emerged national standard language which also subsumes a cluster of semi-standardised dialects.

Language demographics

The most common language spoken at home by South Africans is Zulu (23 percent speak Zulu at home), followed by Xhosa (16 percent), and Afrikaans (14 percent). English is the fourth most common home language in the country (9.6%), but is understood in most urban areas and is (mainly for political reasons) the dominant language in government and the media.^[9]

The majority of South Africans speak a language from one of the two principal branches of the Bantu languages represented in South Africa: the [Sotho–Tswana](#) branch (Sotho, Northern Sotho, Tswana), or the [Nguni](#) branch (Zulu, Xhosa, Swati, Ndebele). For each of the two groups, the languages within that group are for the most part intelligible to a native speaker of any other language within that group.

As can be seen from the accompanying maps, the nine indigenous African languages of South Africa can be divided into two geographical zones, with Nguni languages being predominant in the south-eastern third of the country (Indian Ocean coast) and Sotho languages being predominant in the northern third of the country located further inland, as also in [Botswana](#) and [Lesotho](#). [Gauteng](#) is the most linguistically heterogeneous province, with roughly equal numbers of Nguni, Sotho and Indo-European language speakers. This has resulted in the spread of an urban argot, [Tsotsitaal](#), in large urban townships in the province.

Afrikaans, a language derived from [Dutch](#), is the most widely spoken language in the western half of the country ([Western](#) and [Northern Cape](#)). It is spoken as home language by approximately 61 percent of whites and 76 percent of [Coloured](#) ([multiracial](#)) people in the country.^[1] Afrikaans is also spoken widely across the centre and north of the country, as a second (or third or even fourth) language by Black South Africans living in farming areas.

The [2011 census](#) recorded the following distribution of home language speakers:^[1]

Language	Speakers	Percentage
Zulu	11,587,374	22.7%
Xhosa	8,154,258	16.0%
Afrikaans	6,855,082	13.5%
English	4,892,623	9.6%
Northern Sotho	4,618,576	9.1%
Tswana	4,067,248	8.0%
Sotho	3,849,563	7.6%
Tsonga	2,277,148	4.5%
Swati	1,297,046	2.5%
Venda	1,209,388	2.4%
Ndebele	1,090,223	2.1%
Sign language	234,655	0.5%
Other languages	828,258	1.6%
Total	50,961,443	100.0%

Other significant languages spoken in South Africa

Other languages spoken in South Africa, though not mentioned in the Constitution, include [Fanagalo](#), [Lobedu \(Khilobedu\)](#), [Northern Ndebele \(Sindebele\)](#), [Phuthi \(Siphuthi\)](#). **Lobedu** has been variously claimed to be a dialect of Northern Sotho and an autonomous language. **Fanagalo** is a [pidgin](#) often used as a mining [lingua franca](#).

Significant numbers of immigrants from [Europe](#), elsewhere in [Africa](#), and the [Indian subcontinent](#) means that a wide variety of other languages can also be found in parts of South Africa. In the older immigrant communities there are: [Greek](#), [Gujarati](#), [Hindi](#), [Portuguese](#), [Tamil](#), [Urdu](#), [Yiddish](#), and smaller numbers of Dutch, [French](#) and [German](#) speakers.

These non-official languages may be used in limited semi-official use where it has been determined that these languages are prevalent. More importantly, these languages have significant local functions in specific communities whose identity is tightly bound around the linguistic and cultural identity that these non-official SA languages signal.

The fastest growing non-official language is Portuguese - first spoken by white, black, and [mulato](#) settlers and refugees from [Angola](#) and [Mozambique](#) after they won independence from [Portugal](#) and now by more recent immigrants from those countries again - and increasingly French, spoken by immigrants and refugees from [Francophone Central Africa](#).

More recently, speakers of [North](#), Central and [West African](#) languages have arrived in South Africa, mostly in the major cities, especially in [Johannesburg](#) and [Pretoria](#), but also [Cape Town](#) and [Durban](#).

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